

# Gnosticism, Answers to Who We Are

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I have studied several religions and esoteric teachings, but Gnosticism is the one that really appealed to me. Gnostics were very tolerant in their belief systems, they did not create a dominating religious institution, and they favored mystic experience. What was most appealing to me was that their belief system answered a lot of questions I had about life. So let me share with you what the Gnostics had to say.

As there were many Gnostic groups around with many similar but different views, I present you here with a summary. If you want to know more you can always find literature that explains the different systems.

## Birth of a New Age

1945 was a turning point in our history. The end of the second World War made us reflect on what man is capable of doing to his own kind. The year 1945 had another turning point. In December of that year a discovery was made which would make man reflect upon himself.

In a mountainous region near Nag Hammadi, Egypt, a farmer discovered by accident a large jug containing thirteen volumes of a book containing 52 texts. They were Coptic writings made by Gnostics and hidden away approximately 1600 years ago. It was a discovery of immense value, because before 1945 we knew only about Gnosticism from the account of their persecutors, the orthodox church at that time. After 1600 years we finally could hear what the Gnostics themselves had to say.

What we now call Gnostics is a collection of many sects, communities and groups who lived around the beginning of the era. They reflected a change in the consciousness of mankind with a new view of man and the divine. Originally only a few groups used the term Gnostic, but historians began to use this term for many more groups who held similar belief systems.

Before the beginning of the era there was already a Gnostic system of Hellenistic and Jewish origin. Gnosticism became more defined when in the 2nd century AD a clear distinction happened between Gnostics and orthodox Christians. The orthodox Christians started to persecute the Gnostics because the Gnostic schools were seen as treat to the Church.

The fundamental difference between their teachings is in how they viewed the god of the Old Testament, and in who Christ was. The Gnostics viewed the god of the Old Testament as an evil being that dominates and subjugates man. He is a creator-god ruling with laws, giving rewards or punishments. He is not the god Jesus speaks about. Jesus speaks about a higher God who is full of love and ever-forgiving. The orthodox Christians still were holding on to the idea that the creator-god is also a loving Father, which is not the case when you read the Old

Testament. The Gnostics made a clear distinction between the god of the Old Testament and the god of the New Testament. The creator-god of the Old Testament is a righteous god; he rewards or punishes depending on whether man obeys or offends the laws. He does not know love, and the Old Testament clearly shows that he often is a cruel god. He is an lesser god and is not perfect, because his creation is a failure. He had to expel original man from the Garden of Eden. All his offspring are involved in violence and bloodshed, and the God-Creator needs to eradicate his creation by a deluge, etc.

Around the beginning of the era a change was happening. Many groups were feeling a change of air, something new was coming, something that will initiate a big change. Some groups started mystery initiations, other people started to preach new views of life, and yet others were expecting the arrival of a Messiah, a messenger who will announce a new age. The Essenes were preparing themselves to receive this spiritual being. Then, at the moment of heated religious discussions Jesus arrived. He talked about the existence of a god, since long forgotten. A god who is unlimited, incomprehensible, loving god of whom we are all his children. The creator-god, now called the Demiurge, was seen as a lower being who tried to hold man in darkness. Jesus taught us how we can turn back and enter the original Kingdom far above the heavens of the Demiurge. The Gnostic groups each incorporated the teachings of Jesus in their own way. Some of them were hardly influenced by them, others took over Jesus teachings in their entirety. They claimed to know the "secret teachings" of Jesus Christ, which were partly handed over orally. The four gospels of the orthodox church were not the only ones in existence. There were many more gospels and other texts, but the orthodox church frantically destroyed all but four gospels and texts, including those who possessed these documents. Because there were many Gnostic sects, opinions and teachings are diverse and sometimes apparently contradictory. For the Gnostics this was not that important, as the Truth has many facets. The Gnostics encouraged each other to develop one's own ideas. They considered their teachings, and also those of other religions, to only be approximations of the Truth. That is why the Gnostics were heavily influenced by other traditions like the Jewish, the Persian, the Babylonian, the Egyptian and the Greek. The Essenes in particular had special interests in the texts of other traditions, especially in those that dealt in the well-being of soul and body. They also used herbal remedies and stones to treat illness. They taught the importance of knowing the names of the spirits which caused illness, and the healing essences in plants. In their scriptures we find that Jesus had many names and magic incantations, used to dispel demons which were seen as an obstruction for the soul on its path to the Light. Gnosticism combined many elements, from mysticism to magic. There is no uniform structure we can call Gnosticism. Gnosticism is rather a state of consciousness that expressed itself in different ways in different groups. However some general characteristics do show.

Many people think that the Gnostics were heretics and therefore prosecuted and killed by the early orthodox Christians. Gnostics were no heretics or sinners. There were many Gnostics sects with many philosophies or views of life. Among them were Jewish and Christian sects, and the distinction is sometimes not clear,

as they often borrowed ideas from each other, and from other religions. The manuscripts that were found in Nag Hammadi were collected by Christians, and many of the essays were composed by Christian authors. The orthodox Christian sects held themselves to the traditional Christian beliefs and became intolerant of other Gnostic sects. The orthodox Christians organized themselves and established a Church that excluded the Gnostics.

When the Roman Empire chose the Christian Church as the state religion, the fate of the Gnostics was sealed. The orthodox Christians were very intolerant, and sometimes very cruel. They burned not only the books of the Gnostics, but also the Gnostics themselves, men, women and children, sometimes by the hundreds. A trait the Catholic Church kept going for many centuries to follow.



*Burning witches, from the Zurich Chronik, 1574*

All the texts found in Nag Hammadi have been translated and are available in book format now. I can especially recommend reading the Gospel of Thomas, which is a collection of traditional sayings, prophecies, proverbs, and parables of Jesus, with mystic undertones. "Thunder, Perfect Mind" is also worth while reading; it is a short tract. It contains paradoxical statements that are Zen-like in nature. It has no Jewish, Christian or Gnostic themes, but it allows the reader to transcend belief systems in order to experience the divine mind which transcends any human understanding.

There are a couple of other Gnostic writings on the market outside the Nag Hammadi texts. The Gospel of the Holy Twelve is similar to the Christian gospels, but Jesus repeatedly talks about the importance of vegetarian food and speaks out against the cruelty of animals. The Gospel of the Holy Twelve was supposedly kept by Buddhist monks for many centuries until a century ago when it was handed over to a westerner.

The Essene Gospel of Peace was found in the secret archives of the Vatican and now available through the International Biogenec Society in Canada. It is a nice text that gives a lot of advice for living a healthy and spiritual life.

The "Pistis Sophia" is a voluminous Gnostic text distributed by Rosicrucian circles. It is highly esoteric and difficult to read, but worth while for the esoteric seeker.

Gnosis

Gnosis is a Greek word meaning Knowledge. It is used in relation to the Divine, and point to the knowledge about the Divine. In the philosophical sense, Gnosis is the knowledge of a God that exists "outside" creation and man, and of all the actions of God over "time". In spirituality and mysticism, Gnosis means experiencing the Divine's presence within one's soul and within the creation. In essence the Divine's experience is beyond our language and concepts. We can talk about it, but this will always remain approximations of what cannot be expressed.

## The Equality of All People

The Gnostics had a system that made any hierarchy impossible. When they gathered they first did a drawing of lots. He or she who would draw a certain lot became the "priest" for that gathering, another lot would assign one to "bishop" to give the sacraments, another lot would make you read from the texts. A lot could also make you to "prophet" to speak and teach without preparation. Every gathering would be preceded by this drawing of lots, so each function would see a rotating of people. In a time where orthodox Christians were making an ever greater distinction between clerical hierarchy and laymen, these Gnostic Christians made clear that they refused to acknowledge any such distinction. They did not place their members in higher or lower classes in a hierarchy but adhered themselves strictly to the principle of equality. All members, man and women, took part in the drawing of lots on an equal basis. The drawing also emphasized that human choice was not important. They believed that, because the Divine rules everything in the universe, the result of the drawing of lots was the result of the Divine's decision.

The Gnostics considered themselves as eternal friends who know not of animosity or being malevolent. They were one in gnosis. They lived in an intimate atmosphere of a "spiritual marriage", a society of beings who love each other in wisdom.

In contrast with orthodox sects, women were allowed to participate in their gatherings. Women could also teach, take part in discussions, conduct exorcisms, practice healing, and baptize. In some Gnostics sects they did emphasize the connection of women to sexuality, and sexuality had to be avoided as much as possible because it belongs to the realm of the Demiurge, who hinders the evolution of man's soul.

In 1977, Pope Paul VI, bishop of Rome, was still declaring that women cannot become priests "because the Lord is a man". God as man is a characteristic of the Catholic Church, Judaism and Islam. In other religions we always find a male and a female god as an indivisible pair. They need each other to exist and to express themselves. In general the Gnostics know a supreme divinity whose essence is unknowable, but whom they try to describe in their own words. This divinity can be described as a dual unity, with at one side the Primal Father (the Abyss, the Unpronounceable,...), and at the other side the Primal Mother (Mother of All, the Womb, Bliss, Silence,...). The Mother receives the seed of the Father and brings forth all the emanations of the divinity in a order and in male and female pairs.

The Gnostics speak about the supreme divinity as the Father-Mother or the Mother-Father. Usually they abbreviate it as "the Father", but they still kept the idea of the duality in unity that goes with this word.

This concept is not only a theological one, it also applies in daily life. One always need to balance the male and female.

Jesus said that he who is inspired by the Spirit, be it man or woman, has received the divine's blessing to speak.

## Gnosis is Knowledge

The Gnostics considered Jesus as not only a spiritual teacher, someone who gives revelations, but also as an encourager, to seek gnosis for yourself. It is not sin, but ignorance that brings you into painful situations. The quest is to explore your own self, because within the psyche is the potential for liberation or destruction. Man, know thyself. Jesus often points to the fact that the source of knowledge is in man himself. Looking for this knowledge, or gnosis, is a lonely, difficult process in which one encounters an inner resistance. This resistance against Gnosis is the desire to "sleep" or to stay "drunk". Aside from the teachings of Jesus, the student, by self-knowledge, can find those things that even Jesus cannot teach him. In Gnostic texts we find basically two issues: to distance oneself from the world and its pleasures, and the inner experience of Christ.

How can we describe the term "Gnosis"? According to Theodotus, 140-160 AD) Gnosis is "The knowledge of what we are, what we have been, the place from which we have come, the place into which we have fallen, the goal we are striving for and from which we have been pulled away, and the nature of our birth and of our rebirth."

The Gnostics used the term Gnosis for "knowledge", "insight", because Gnosis implies an intuitive process of self-knowledge. To know oneself means to know the nature and destiny of man. "He who does not know himself, does not know anything, but he who knows himself, knows the depth of all things." (Book of Thomas the Athlete). Self-knowledge to the deepest level, is knowledge of the Divine.

Monoimus: "Give up seeking for God, the creation and other such things. Seek him by taking yourself as point of origin. Learn who he is, inside you, attract everything to itself and says: " My God, my spirit, my thinking, my soul, my body". To attain gnosis is to learn the true source of divine power, this is the "depth" of all being. He who knows this source, gains self-knowledge, and discovers its origin. He has discovered his true Father and Mother.

He who has attained this Gnosis, is ready to receive the secret sacrament of "redemptio". Before the candidate attained gnosis he held the Demiurge for the true God. Now, by the sacrament of redemptio, the candidate shows that he has liberated himself from the Demiurge. In this ritual he addresses himself to the Demiurge and declares his independence from him. He shows that he is no longer under the influence or ruling of the Demiurge, but that he now belongs to what is above the Demiurge: "I am a son of the Father, the pre-existent Father. I derive my existence from Him, who is pre-existent, and I am returning to my own place,

where I came from."

## A General Image of Gnostic Ideas

Far "above" the creation is the Father (abbreviation of the Father-Mother), the divinity of which Jesus spoke. Every description of this supreme being is a negation, because it can not be expressed in our language. It is called incomprehensible, unlimited, indivisible, the Perfection, the Depth, the Abyss, and so on. All these terms are only descriptions. The divinity cannot be expressed in human language.

From this supreme divinity the Aeons, also called the Powers or Virtues, emanated. "Aeon" comes from Hellenistic Gnosticism. Aeons are divine or semi-divine beings. The term Pleroma describes the place where those beings reside. The Aeons can be seen as more or less personified characteristics of the Father, or as heavenly prototypes of spiritual man who is the bearer of pneuma (life, or Spirit). In most Gnostic theologies the Aeons are in pairs, male and female. Pleroma, is their residence, also called the Kingdom of Light, the Original House, the House of Perfection, the Gardens of Light and so on. Pneuma is a word to describe a part of Pleroma that will fall into Darkness later on (think of it as a divine light particle). In Pleroma is also Primal Man, the Primal Adam, Man (with a capital M). In other theologies the Father emanates angels. Both Aeons as angels are arranged in classes. All this happens well before creation, and before the following.

At a certain point something happens that is generally called the Fall. Several explanation for this Fall existed:

Light comes into contact with Darkness. A part of the Light is swallowed by darkness and by this the Light broken into pieces, into light particles, called pneuma. This is called "blending", "splintering". Darkness encapsulates strongly all these light particles.

Primal Man looked down into Darkness, or into the Waters, and saw his mirrored reflection. He became in love with this reflection by which he "fell" into the Darkness. The original image of Man stayed behind in Pleroma, but the reflection took shape and became trapped by the forces of Darkness. This is very similar to the Narcissus myth in ancient Greece.

The lowest (in rank) divine beings, or Aeons, had a tendency to direct their attention downwards out of curiosity, vanity, sensual lust, and so on. By this part of them sank into the Darkness.

Sophia (Wisdom), the lowest in rank among the Aeons and prototype of arbitrary human wisdom, ignites into desire to penetrate the father in order to learn about him. Because this is impossible for her, and even dangerous, she is repelled, by which her lower emotions and passions are separated and expelled into the Darkness. The expelled emotions and passions are called Achamoth, or the lower Sophia. Out of her the Demiurge and the Archonts (Rulers) emanate.

Some Gnostic sects knew the Demiurge as the King of Darkness. He is the creator in the Old Testament. Because he is an imperfect creator, his creation is also

imperfect. His entire creation is a reflection, an imitation of an image of Pleroma he once was able to see. In his ignorance he thinks he is the only god there is. The Demiurge emanates seven Archonts, his helpers, who each have a seat in a heavenly sphere. These seven heavens have a correspondence with the seven planets. Paradise is above the third heaven. Up to now creation still did not happen.

Creation of the World (=the Universe in all its aspects and in all its substantial gradations, was done by the Demiurge, or by him and his Archonts, or by lower angels or archangels according to the different Gnostics systems. Let us continue with the systems that talk about the Demiurge. Together with the Archonts he creates man, with the purpose of keeping the reflection of the Kingdom of Light in a world that he created. According to other versions the Demiurge can only create a lifeless being, and Sophia brings life (=pneuma) into it. The Demiurge and the Archonts form a body from matter and a soul from psychic substance. The spirit is pneuma, also called pneumatic seed, spark, drop, salt of the earth.

By the Fall, Darkness has enveloped these light particles in such a way that they became "benumbed". This is the reason why man does not remember his divine origin. Man has forgotten about Pleroma, his Original House. He has fallen in a kind of unconscious state; he is "sleeping", he is "drunk", he is "benumbed". The Demiurge tries everything to keep man in this sleeping state of mind. He conceals the existence of a divinity higher than himself. He chains man even more strongly by his helpers, the Archonts. The Archonts fix in each man, by birth, soul characteristics and psychic forces like lower passions and desires (the astrological blueprint at birth). Sexuality and sensual pleasure is also an invention of the Archonts to entangle man in the World. Some Gnostic sects saw marriage and begetting children as an invention of the Archonts, or the lower angels, to multiply their subordinates.

For the Gnostic this world is like a prison; he does not feel at home here. He is a "stranger". His real self is divine, the divine spirit, or spark. Everything in this world of Darkness does not belong to him, is not of his essence. This material world is not his home, his real home is the Kingdom of Light.

How can man wake up from his unconscious, sleepy, benumbed state? By Gnosis, Knowledge. By Knowledge of the nature of things, man will remember his divine origin. Knowledge makes man free to return to his land of origin, the Kingdom of Light. The pneumatic part of man becomes self-conscious. By Knowledge he is able to ascend through the seven heavenly spheres (where the Archonts rule). He conquers the Archonts and the Demiurge and arrives in the eighth sphere, the Ogdoas, where Achamoth-Sophia lives. She made the Ogdoas her home after her "conversion", her "purification". She now resides there with all beings who have ascended to this level, until the Completion of the World. This will happen when all pneumatic elements, by Knowledge, have become perfect and have entered the Ogdoas. All light particles will then be gathered together again. Then all spirits will enter Pleroma.

The spirit can not ascend from the Fall by its own power. He needs help from a Mediator. In Christian Gnosticism Christ descends to hand over Knowledge. Non-Christian Gnostics know a Redeemer who brings "knowledge of the path", the

path man needs to take to get out of this world. This includes sacramental and magical preparations for the future ascension, knowledge of the secret names and the secret formulas that will help to force one's way through the heavenly spheres.

Every moment of the day a true Gnostic remembers that he is a divine being. He acknowledges his present state of being. He knows he is in the world, but not from the world. His body and soul are like garments that allow him to function in the world, but he strives his entire life to return to the Kingdom of Light. He does not attach importance to sensual pleasure or material gain, but focuses on the divine Light, or pneuma, within himself.

## The Paradise Story

The Gnostics had their own interpretation of what happened in Paradise. Man in paradise was experiencing all pleasures of a dreamy existence. Paradise had been created by the Demiurge to keep people happy, but also to keep them ignorant. They had access to the entire garden and could eat from all the trees but the one in the middle, the Tree of Good and Evil. The Demiurge claimed that eating from this tree would cause them to die. It was a lie because the Demiurge knew that man would transform when eating the forbidden fruit.

Then came the serpent, by orthodox Christians vilified to be Satan. One has to remember that in the old days, the serpent was widely regarded as the source of wisdom and transformation. The serpent persuaded the people to eat from the Tree of Good and Evil. Now they woke up, and were able to see who the Demiurge really was, and what the true origin of man is. They saw that the Demiurge was a lesser, tyrannical god, subject to the divine Light, and by that also to the divine spirit in every human being. Man rebelled against the creator (the Demiurge), who expelled them from Paradise.



Being expelled man arrived in a world of suffering, a world under the influence of cosmic laws. At the entrance of Paradise a guardian prevented man's return to also eat from the Tree of Life to attain immortality. Eating from the Tree of Life



means that man has purified himself to the extent that he has arrived at the Ogdoas, where he is free of all worldly bonds, and where he is greater than the Demiurge and his helpers.

The serpent here is a symbol of redemption. Some Gnostic sources say that Sophia Prunikos (the lower Sophia) sent the serpent to Adam and Eve. Other Gnostics considered the serpent to be Christ himself. The serpent was also seen as the "pneumatic principle" in man that rebels against the intentions of the Demiurge.

### Jesus Christ, the Mystic Teacher



The Gnostics did not see Jesus as a teacher of sin and sorrow, but rather of what is illusion and of enlightenment. He did not come here to save us but to guide us to the spiritual, or inner, world. Once the student has arrived at enlightenment, Jesus is no longer his spiritual master because both have become the same. Jesus taught us how we ourselves can become like him.

Because the Gnostics saw the material world as evil, they could not accept a material, or bodily incarnation of Jesus. Jesus was seen as a divine being, and a divine being does not know suffering. So he could not have suffered and died on the cross. Jesus came here to bring Gnosis (Knowledge) about the true identity of the World, of the Demiurge and about who we really are.

For those Gnostics who saw Jesus as a human being, they made a distinction between the human Jesus and the divine Christ who worked through Jesus. In this case Jesus was a vehicle for Christ to fulfill his work on earth. Other Gnostics saw Jesus as a very advanced human who was directly inspired by the highest divinity.

In any case the divine being could not have suffered. Christ left the human Jesus before the suffering in his last days. Or, another human, looking like Jesus, took his place to fulfill a symbolic drama for the eyes of many people. Because a divine being can not suffer, the Gnostics looked at the Resurrection in a totally different way than the orthodox Christians. For the Gnostics human existence is like a spiritual death. The spiritual life of the divine pneuma in each human being has been severely diminished by the "weight" of physical matter. Resurrection is the moment of enlightenment. It is the revelation of what really exists, what is the spiritual or the divine. The Gnostics were not so much interested in historical facts

of Jesus, but more in the possibility of meeting the resurrected Christ in the present. This could happen in dreams, in spiritual ecstasy, in visions, or in moments of enlightenment.

If you want to study gnosticism, I recommend *The Gnostic Religion* by Hans Jonas!

